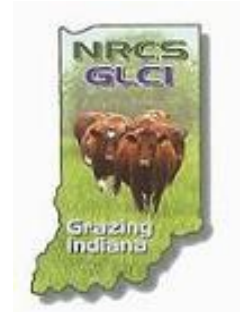


Grazing Bites

December 2012

Victor Shelton, NRCS State Agronomist/Grazing Specialist

It is the time of year that some may be dreaming of visions of sugar plums, but if you were a grazing animal, it might be more like visions of turnips and stockpiled grass! The rain we did receive the past three months revived perennial forages and where adequate “solar panel” was left behind – a lot more forage than normal. Perhaps it was the plant trying to meet its annual potential or the boost from a little stored nitrogen waiting to be utilized – either way, it was a much needed blessing.



I would encourage everyone to manage this forage efficiently. Allocating it out in smaller allotments, like briefly discussed last month, is certainly something worth pursuing. The smaller the allotment allocated; the shorter the grazing period...but the higher the efficiency. We are at this point basically “feeding” standing hay but with the exceptions – no tractor, mower, rake or baler required and the waste products are automatically redistributed back onto the place of origin where it will do the most good. Now, it does take a little effort. The temporary fence does not get rolled up and or moved by itself, nor the temporary fence posts. A nice walk, a little exercise in cooler weather, while observing the animals grazing, just can’t be a chore - no matter how hard you try and make it that way. We should be checking them anyway and we don’t even have to start up a tractor to feed them.

That old cow might seem pretty content standing at the bale ring eating your selection of hay for her, but if you really gave her a choice, and she had the choice of green fall regrowth or that hay, she will probably choose to graze rather than to eat the hay in most cases. It is kind of like choosing between sirloin steak and a hamburger...oh, sorry girls.

Now, this forage is for the most part dormant now and we could probably take it down a little bit closer than our normal growing season “stop grazing” heights...but, think twice this year. Rainfall for both October and November has been below average for most of the state and we are still behind for the year in most areas. The last thing we want to do, not knowing for sure what is ahead of us, is over graze, even during the winter months.

We really need to maintain good cover and maximize rainfall infiltration. We can encourage this by keeping or leaving some adequate stubble behind after the last grazing that will slow runoff and help that rain water stay on site. The more organic matter your particular soil contains, the higher the water holding capacity. Organic carbon can hold up to eight times its weight in water. Organic matter is kind of the ultimate contingency plan...and you don’t have to do anything but maintain it.

How do you do that? Maintain good cover at all times, allow adequate rest between grazing periods so the forages can maintain adequate roots and grow new ones, don’t overgraze, and absolutely maintain good “stop grazing” heights which usually are four inches for most cool-season forages, insure that adequate fertility is present to enable plants to reach their potential and allow some/more plants to reach a higher carbon content. If the plants are too vegetative, it could easily have more nitrogen present than ideal, too late, and way too much carbon. The goal should be to try and keep that plant during the

growing season between the two stages where the carbon to nitrogen ratio is more ideal for animal performance. So important to maintain that required mat on the rumen.

Some soils or sites could certainly use or benefit from more organic matter. Can we increase organic matter in the soil? We can and the benefits certainly make it worth the effort. We can slowly build more organic matter, carbon, into the soil by the same above mentioned methods but faster if we also make sure to include good plant diversity, longer rest periods and during at least part of the annual rotation, allow some or more of the forages to mature a little more – more carbon. The cows will know what to do – they will eat the best and leave the rest...and improve the soil in the process. Healthy soil; healthy plants; healthy animals...healthy food.

Better to be prepared for a drought and not have one than to have one with no game plan.

Keep on grazing!

Mark your Calendar!

Indiana Grazing Conferences –

Northern Indiana Grazing Conference – February 1-2, 2013; Michiana Event Center in Howe, Indiana. Speakers include Scott Stoller from Sterling, Ohio, Reuben Stoltzfus from Pennsylvania, Will Winter from Wisconsin (this is really a brain you want to pick), Howard Person, Jerry Perkins, Jim Courtright, and yours truly all from here in Indiana. For more information contact the LaGrange County Soil and Water Conservation office at 260-463-3471, Extension 3, email Marsha Bogado at marsha.bogado@in.nacdn.net or visit their website at <http://www.lagrangeswcd.org>.

Southern Indiana Grazing Conference – February 6th, 2013; Simon Graber Community Center near Odon, Indiana. Speakers will include Walt Davis who raises cattle, sheep and goats and author of the book, “How to Not go Broke Ranching”, knows the tricks of the trade; David Hall from Missouri, selecting cattle for fescue; Gabe Brown from North Dakota, Gabe is adamant that a successful farm starts with a healthy soil, Gabe is backed by Jay Fuhrer from NRCS tying livestock into a healthy cropping system; Ed Ballard from Illinois, specializing in extending the grazing season, and Wally Olson from Oklahoma with years of experience in marketing strategies. For more information contact the Daviess County Soil and Water Conservation office at 812-254-4780 Extension 3, email Toni Allison at dcswcd@rtccom.net, or visit their website at http://daviesscoswcd.org/main/page_sigc.html.

Livestock, Forage & Grain Forum - February 11, 2013, JW Marriott, Indianapolis - Registration opens December 1st – more information is available at http://www.indianasoybean.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=386